

# REACH THE BEACH 2006

Bretton Woods to Hampton Beach  
New Hampshire



# A Race Odyssey

By: Bazooka Joe Boyce

The Silver Bullet van first veered around the corner of the building before 9 am Thursday morning September 14th. Captain Maverick had arrived.

After snacking on warm bagels, compliments of Kim and Marni, we packed the van in a steady rain, stuffing bags and boxes into every nook and cranny. We drove across the construction road at Fort Washington and headed east on the turnpike. For the next four days, the van would be our virtual home: bed, bath, and beyond. Our long and winding road to Reach the Beach had begun.

Our team was The Whole Nine Yards, at this point missing a stitch:

Captain Maverick, Brett Rogowski

Co-Captain Kenny Baby Surowitz

Our trusty driver Steve “Roller Coaster of Love”

Lungren

Our Canadian, Karen Kingma

Jim Hee Haw Haugh

Kamomile Kim Matheson

Marnilicious Gangel

All Business Melanie Schranz

Bazooka Joe Boyce

The trip went fast with a treasure trove of snacks, snappy conversation, passing magazines and papers, and occasional bathroom breaks prompted by Jim, whose bladder obviously rivals my own for its need for frequent relief. Either that or Jim and I simply hydrate well. Our first stop didn’t even get us out of Jersey.

We lunched in Westboro, MA at DAngelo's Deli where we met our 9th runner, Gail Miller, who zoomed up in a small red Chevy Aveo. Kenny, proving you can take the man out of Philly but not Philly out of the man, ordered the hot special that turned out to be a cheesesteak. Not quite a Schmitter but a good second.

In New Hampshire we spotted a moose on the side of the road, standing resolutely, like a sentry at the mountain pass. We made a beer run, but chose a country store named Living Waters, an alcohol-free family-owned establishment. It was a beautiful broad-beamed log cabin, the thick wood glistening in the rain, and along with every other place in the backwoods sold pizza and homemade fudge, which looked mouth-watering, especially the chunky Rocky Road. But after a ride of peanut M&Ms, Fig Newtons, hard pretzels, trail mix, Cheez Its, almonds, Swedish Fish, and other treats, no one indulged. One thing not eaten was the gummy snake Jim was given by the team, though he did wear it around his neck. Why a gummy snake? Stay tuned.

We found beer at the Bretton Woods Station, a building that was at one point, given its name, a railroad station. After pulling out of the parking lot, we discovered the ski lodge hosting the race expo right across the street. Bode Miller is the ski director there, and considering his Olympic

escapades, I can only imagine he didn't have as much trouble finding beer as we did.

The rain had subsided, and clouds were floating like a soft silken scarf over the gray-clad mountaintops. We exited the van to behold a massive hill, the cut-out swatches of the ski lift stretching up the mountain like stitching on a giant's fat belly. Up and up, the lift slithered toward the peak.

"That's the first leg," Jim said. "It goes up the lift, across the top of the mountain, and down along the other lift."

I was glad I wasn't doing leg one, described as the hardest 5K you'll ever run. Staring up into the clouds, I believed it. Just then, high above, we saw a flash of white moving on the hill, the shirt of a runner. Someone was practicing their first leg.

Wearing the Melanie-made black and white striped referee shirts, called pinnies, with The Whole 9 Yards and our names on the back, we entered the ski lodge around 6 pm. The registration area was meticulously organized. All teams were required to present two reflective vests, two headlamps, and two sets of flashing lights, all needed for nighttime running. Without them, you couldn't start the race. Also needed were two sets of maps and driving directions. Brett only had one set, so when asked to show the second set, he just fanned a bunch of papers clipped together and the race official said,

“Great, thank you.” Rule one: a good captain knows sleight of hand.

Captain Brett and Co-Captain Kenny attended the mandatory captains’ meeting while the rest of us explored the expo, which had a variety of race gear: fleece vests, shirts, and jackets. A rep from Nemo displayed a \$355 no-pole tent, which with your foot you pumped compressed air into deflated tubes. The tent went up to full height in less than a minute.

“Do you do a lot of adventure running?” the rep asked, grinning broadly.

“Actually, this is my first one,” I answered.

The rep was undaunted. “Well, if you start doing more, this tent is a must. It packs down quickly, weighs ounces, and you can take it anywhere. Here, take my card.”

“Thanks.” I slipped away for the free samples of Emergen C, a fizzy Airborne type of crystal you add to water, and Bear Naked Granola, which you add to your belly.

After some debate, due to the lack of choices for vegetarian Brett, we ate dinner at the lodge at 6:45 pm. We should have followed our captain because the \$15 price was exorbitant for essentially hamburgers, hot dogs, and salads. Some offset the cost by chugging pints of Sam Adams. We chatted

with the Ambler Stampede team and their captain, Nathan Relles.

There were some fun team names in the event. Don't Drink That, It's Not Gatorade. Stand By Your Van. Ignorance is Blisters.



*Our Reach The Beach Team (L to R) Back Row: Marni Gangle, Melanie Schranz, Joe Boyce, Kenny Surowitz, Jim Haugh, Karen Kingma, Steve Lungren, Front Row: Gail Miller, Captain Brett Rogowski, Kim Matheson*

Back at our van, after taking a photo in front of a roaring outdoor fire, we found yellow RTB bottle holders on our seats, courtesy of Karen and Steve. Around 9 pm, we pulled up to the Attitash Resort for our overnight stay. Melanie, in charge of lodging, assisted everyone to their rooms and waited for her friend Andrew to arrive from

Portsmouth. When a runner dropped out at the last minute, Andrew volunteered to run. Marni bunked in Karen and Steve's room, and until Andrew arrived, Steve and I shared a few laughs watching Woody Allen's *Bananas*. Brett, Kenny, Jim, Kim, and Gail shared a two-story condo with an attic loft. Here we had a strategy meeting reviewing rules, legs, and last-minute suggestions. Ironically, as further reading will reveal, Wade from the Ambler Stampede attended, perhaps lured by our beer.

In ceremonial fashion, Brett gave out the numbers amid cheers and dancing. Oh, those Golden Slippers. Steve pulled out the stopwatch we would be using to time the race, and we all chuckled. It was old style with a second hand tick-tocking around a circular clock. It seemed more suited for Sigmund Freud saying, "You're getting very sleepy." This was not your father's stopwatch; it was your grandfather's. Before bed, Brett gave a pep talk about the race: do your best, there's no pressure, have fun, and above all be safe.

The next morning, Friday, under overcast yet warm skies, around 8:45 am, we re-packed the van. There was so little room in the seating compartment that I didn't dare pilfer any soap from the hotel, like Ross from the TV show *Friends*. We began the journey back to Bretton Woods. Traveling on part of the course, we calculated where we might see the Ambler Stampede, which started at 8:26 am, and we began looking for their runner: the aforementioned Wade.

When we saw a stocky-muscled runner someone yelled, “There’s Wade.” We pulled the van over, piled out, and got ready to cheer. Except it wasn’t Wade. Another stocky runner passed: “Hey, there’s Wade.” It wasn’t Wade. We began laughing, and then anytime we sighted a runner with Wade’s build, we intentionally joked, “Hey, there’s Wade.” On and on it went, somehow getting more and more laughs. “There’s Wade.” Nope, not Wade. “Over there, it’s Wade.” It was never Wade, and yet we giggled and laughed like school kids.

At Bretton Woods Lodge, we ate another overpriced meal, this time a breakfast of chalky scrambled eggs, frozen waffles, and dry toast. In our zebra referee shirts and with Steve wearing his “I Deserve a Beer” derby, we took our official team photo, front and back, showing off our Number 9s, and then unofficially under the start banner.



*Team 275 - "The Whole 9 Yards" at the starting line of Reach the Beach 2006 ready to run.*

Teams started in staggers every 20 minutes, and because the race started 6 minutes late, we started 6 minutes late at 11:26 am when Gail began our Reach the Beach quest. Across a rocky and rain-soaked trail, she dashed past us, and up to the summit she went following the ski lift, an elevation of 1500 feet, across soggy mud and slippery grass from yesterday's rain. It was black-diamond hard. We scampered a couple hundred yards down the path to the first exchange point, and staring up the side of the mountain, we saw Gail zigzagging her way down some twenty minutes later.

Here represents one of the great pleasures of relay racing: the intrepid waiting and then finally seeing your teammate coming. We were elated, and began cheering, ringing our cowbells, and blowing our referee whistles. Gail came down the bend and around the snow fence. Among the other teams supporting their runners, we kept cheering and whistling loudly. We were the sound of thunder, a sound that as the race continued everyone knew to expect The Whole Nine Yards.



*Gail before her first leg up the mountain. Gail is from Colorado and she swore this leg was harder than anything she's ever run in Colorado.*

Gail finished the first leg 4 minutes ahead of pace and slapped the silver magnetic band onto Marni's wrist. We hustled to the van, and soon were speeding up the road cheering for Marni as she wound her way through a village of townhouses on a rolling 3.1 miles to the exchange at the State Highway Depot. Admittedly, Marni was nervous on her fist leg. Even though it turned out to be her

shortest and flattest leg, she found it to be the most difficult. “I was so nervous,” she said, “that I couldn’t quite relax into the run and so my breath was a bit out of control which made the run harder.”

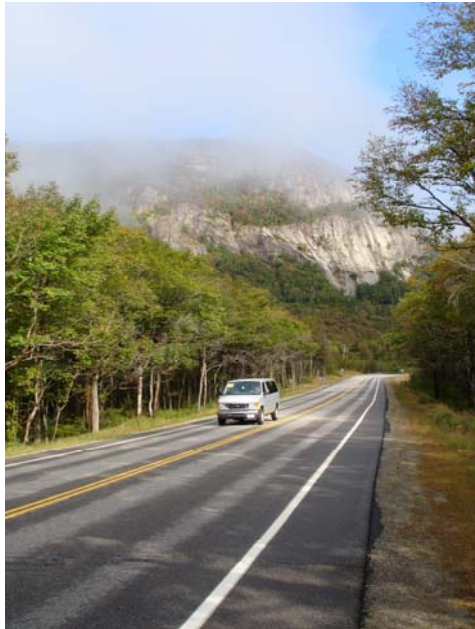
If Marni were nervous, it didn’t show. To everyone’s delight, she completed the leg in what would prove to be a team trend, ahead of pace. Karen took over the 3.7 miler of steep descents. We had been warned about the downhills, tailor-made to scorch the quads. Yet when we approached Karen in the van, she was smiling brightly at our roar of bells and whistles. Another trend was forming: our teammates were performing well and having a great time doing it.

Karen said, “This was a short leg so I wanted to run it fast.” Yet mostly she was just happy to finally be running instead of just talking about running, as the team had done for months leading up to the event. The mountain glen scenery was spectacular. “If I wasn’t in such a hurry,” Karen recalled, “I might have stopped to admire.” She began feeling the steep downhills in her quads that stayed with her the rest of the race. Once the descents took a toll, they stayed in your quads the entire time.

Kim was getting ready for her leg at the Cliffside transition area, and she went through the steps: Hadda pee, hadda stretch, hadda Garmin, hadda Gu, hadda laces, hadda breathe. She was really hyped up, nervous. What pace would she run? How would she handle the first major downhill? She knew one

thing; she wasn't going to let the team down. No time to chill.

At the exchange, we were awed by a mountain that seemed to rise straight up like a cliff from a peaceful brook. Steve and I posed for a photo with the mountain, towering and magnificent, behind us. We had a mini-feast on the side of the road: peanut butter and jelly bagels. There was no lack of carbs; Brett had brought a Tupperware full of spaghetti, compliments of his wife.



*The amazing beauty of New Hampshire gave us plenty of opportunity to “sightsee” while running.*

And then Kim was ready: “Ok, here comes Karen.”

At a train trestle, 6 minutes ahead of pace, Karen handed off the wristband to Kim, who was already excitedly talking about her planned roadkills. A roadkill is any runner you catch, pass, and beat on your leg. The sun had burned away the clouds, and the temperature was heating up. And so was Kim. “Great handoff,” she thought, “and I’m flying! Damn, taking this downhill too hard, can’t help it, feel so good.” She passed one roadkill at the start, then she was alone, so peaceful, so pretty.

She thought she saw another potential roadkill in the distance, but the person was coming toward her in boots, dreads, pack, scruff. Kim screamed, “Where’s your van?”

The guy didn’t look amused. He didn’t comprehend. He said, “I’m hiking the Appalachian Trail.”

“Oh, cool, good luck with that,” Kim said, thinking, “Loser, could be doing RTB and that roadkill doesn’t count.” She was clicking off sub-7 miles, flying along the road, passing the NH State Park entrance to Arethusa Falls. The 200 foot height brought back memories. “It was where I first learned to ice climb freshman year in college,” she recalled. For the next mile, it was all smiles. Ahead there was more roadkill. It was either the South Jersey or the Somerville Running Club.

Either way, it was a yellow singlet. She finished on the attack, smiling intently, racking up 2 roadkill.



*This is Kim. She's not running, she's racking up roadkill.*

Captain Maverick, Brett took the handoff, darting out as if shot from a cannon. Several roadkills lay ahead. His leg was a hard 8.6 with continually steep descents. He had been waiting a long time for this moment: all the pre-work, meetings, fun runs, pulling the team together, and of course his own training. He was pleased how well everyone was meshing as a team, and now he was running. The fall colors rushing by had slowed now, and he focused on a group of runners going down the hill, picking them off one by one.

“This time last year,” Brett recalled, “I could barely run a 9 minute mile.” And here he was clicking along at a 7:15 pace. He rounded a bend and passed a few more runners. His Garmin GPS watch beeped for mile 8, and he set his sights on a guy in a yellow shirt 100 yards ahead. He was tired from the effort, a long difficult leg, yet he wouldn’t be denied.

After supporting him with water at the halfway point, we drove to Attitash where we had lodged the night before. While Melanie went to the exchange point for her leg, Jim and I went into the restaurant to order food: he pizza, me a turkey sandwich. We saw Ambler Stampede runners Nathan, Jack, and Wade (“There’s Wade.”) sharing a pizza. With two vans and twelve runners compared to our one van and nine runners, they had a couple hours of downtime.

Worried I would miss Melanie’s start, Jim waited for my sandwich. I scooted to the start only to discover I wasn’t allowed to cross the road. I had to go back to the lodge and take the underpass. I jogged back through the underpass to the start line just in time to wish Melanie luck before Brett appeared at the top of a mountain curve. It was about 200 yards from the finish, and Brett was busting butt, churning past Mr. Yellow. The runner picked up his pace, and Brett heard him coming up from behind.

“All I could think of,” Brett said, “is my team watching me get road-killed.” And that wasn’t

going to happen, so Maverick, feeling the need for speed, threw his throttle into another gear to an all-out sprint. We cheered him lustily and then finally told him to slow down because Mr. Yellow had backed off. Brett eased up, huffing and puffing.

“It was a stupid move to sprint because I have 18 miles more to run,” Brett said. “But well worth the effort.” As he handed off to Melanie, he saw the determined look on her face. This year, he knew it was for real.

As Brett and I walked toward the underpass, he thanked me for telling him the runner behind him had slowed down. We both agreed that whatever energy you could preserve you should preserve in the first set of four legs. However, Brett’s surge to the finish, fists bared for battle, had inspired and enlivened our already-enthusiastic team, and we were all intent on matching our captain’s gutsy performance.

Melanie’s leg was a hard 7.2 with both elevation gain and steep descents. Though roadkill was tempting, having previous relay experience, she decided to run conservatively because her second run was harder than her first. Fortunately, the roadkill was mostly out of sight. We stopped to meet her with water. Steve found a spot on the left side of the road and cautioned us to be careful of oncoming traffic. We were on a bend overlooking Cathedral Ledge where rock climbers scale the mountain. I went up the road about 50 yards, and

right on schedule to Brett's pre-race chart, Melanie was coming down the bend with a strong steady stride. She looked great, and I handed her water. She drank and handed the bottle to Kenny waiting up by the van.

Another trend was becoming clear. We were the loudest and most ardent team on the course with our bells and whistles and loud voices. Our van was dressed to the nines. We had a giant helium balloon of a 9 strapped to the back of the van. Our names were plastered across one side on the windows. On the other side, Brett, man of many talents, had drawn a football field with yard markers leading from one end zone at Bretton Woods to the other end zone of Hampton Beach. Our name The Whole Nine Yards was emblazoned on the front hood. On the side mirrors, we had number 9s.



*Every team decorates their van. This is ours. Part of the fun of the Relay is seeing the creativity. While most teams used two vans to transport their team, we crammed our team into one. It was cozy, smelly, dirty and fun. We wouldn't have wanted to do it any other way.*

When I asked Brett what we had put on top of the van for helicopters to view, he answered with his sardonic humor, “A big middle finger.” Just to be sure he was kidding, I checked— and the top was clear.

Meanwhile, at the exchange, I prepared to run, taking out the first of my four oversized zip-lock baggies that stored my running gear. The team had a great space-saving and smell-saving idea. Take your running gear out of the bag clean and then zip

it back up with the sweaty clothes afterward. It was the system we all used, and it worked to a charm. In the congestion within the van, having clothes in preordained bags gave easy access to your gear.

The exchange was at Echo State Park with showers to use (I didn't) and toilets (no surprise, I did). The finish for Melanie was a straightaway down a tree-lined road, yet the exchange was hidden around a bend behind a phalanx of trees. She couldn't see me, and I couldn't see her. We set up a system of lookouts, almost like signal fires, to notify the awaiting runner of the approaching runner. As he would on every exchange, Steve jogged up ahead a couple hundred yards and then signaled down the lane to another teammate that our runner was approaching by waving and blowing a whistle. When Karen got Steve's signal, she waved to me, thereby setting off the thunder of cowbells, whistles, and shouts that became our calling card. The bells and whistles meant to lookout for The Whole Nine Yards.

And then there she was, coming around the turn, charging in, her face still determined. Melanie had run a couple minutes ahead of pace, and she thought: "One down, three to go." She slapped me with the wristband and implored, "Go, go, go!"

I went. I had planned to go steady at tempo for the 6.6 leg. Well, the best laid plans of mice, men, and runners often go awry.

Two things worked against my will to run conservatively. One, the great efforts of the six teammates before who had run ahead of their pre-recorded paces, especially that sprint by Brett during his finish. And two, there was roadkill ahead, including a guy in a kilt from the team called Roadkilt. He had passed me within the first half mile, and earlier in the van, I had joked that I had one goal during the race: not to be passed by a guy in a skirt. I chased, and I would like to report that I caught him, going by him so fast that his skirt blew up like Marilyn Monroe's in *Bus Stop*. But try as I did, he was pacing with another runner, and they outdistanced me.

Halfway into my leg, the van found an ideal place to pull over on a nice wide shoulder, except it was next to a barn full of cows and pigs and the accompanying smell. The team toughed it out. I just thought it was one of Brett's infamous belches. The team joked about my stiff running style and yelled, "Use your arms." They took to calling me the Tin Man.

Toward the end of the leg, I saw the big number 9 balloon on the Silver Bullet van at a red light. And then surprisingly, Brett was running back toward me on the shoulder of the road. He told me the van was caught in traffic and that Jim had to run up a mile to the exchange. Brett said Jim would be there but the van wouldn't. I nodded. At the light, I turned right to a crossover zone on the busy street where a policeman, halting traffic, waved me on. I

had plenty of energy to finish, but had worked harder than intended, and I was worried what the future effect would be on the remaining three legs.

I approached the exchange and realized with dismay that Jim wasn't there. Then 20 yards from the cones, I saw a port-a-potty door open. Jim dashed out, his eyes widening when he saw me, and we both reached the line at the same time. I slapped him with the wristband baton. I had finished my leg ahead of our predicted pace chart, which Brett had calculated using half-marathon pace along with what he called a crack factor, or the difficulty of the leg due to hills and length. We found as the race continued that Brett's calculations were amazingly accurate.

Jim was starting the hardest leg of the entire 210 mile course, a leg rated Extremely Hard. There were two legs rated extremely hard: this one and Gail's first leg up the ski lift. Legs were rated Easy, Moderate, Hard, Very Hard, and Extremely Hard. For comparison, the hills at Tyler Park would have been rated by race officials as Easy to Moderate.

Jim's leg was a killer with several substantial climbs and descents, midway turning onto a dirt trail up and down a mountain. Anytime the leg is described as continuing through a ski area, it spells trouble. It was also desolate and beginning to darken, and Jim had to run a mile to the start because the van had been stuck in traffic. On the bright side, the leg is known for having fantastic

views, and Jim reported that they were awe-inspiring. He saw a moose on the trail. Alone on a mountain, one man, one moose. Imagine man and beast nodding at each other with respect, or the moose laughing at man's folly.

If matters could have been worse for Jim, our support van made them worse. As we traveled up the mountain gorge, we marveled at the scenery and spoke in hushed tones of the number and sizes of the hills. At the designated water stop, the van is required to stay on the road going left, while the runner heads onto the trail going right.

Unfortunately we couldn't find a parking space. A quarter mile past the drop spot, Brett and Kim jumped out with a water bottle. We urged Steve to pull the van over anywhere, but he calmly informed us we were on a road where we were forbidden to park. A mile out, we made a U-turn and headed back to the drop zone where the race marshals allowed us to temporarily pull over to pick up Brett and Kim. But the marshals wouldn't allow us to stay in the congested area to wait for Jim.

We fretted, and for good reason. Later in the race, one guy bonked in the heat. In a brain-drained hallucination, he began running around in circles and then went the other way in the wrong direction until he received medical help. We needed to get Jim water. And Brett had a brainstorm. He took the water and wrote Jim's name on a manila folder and propped it up on the dirt road around the bend. Even more brilliantly, instead of writing "Jim," our

quick-thinking captain wrote “Hee Haw,” Jim’s nickname, so there would be no mistake whose water it was. It was the hardest leg, and with the sun blazing all day it was hot and humid. And we were high up in the atmosphere.

We felt a little better driving away thinking Jim would get the water, though we figured he would be disappointed not to see his cheering teammates before heading up onto the mountain trail. Little did we know...

Jim felt great running, and in the first half mile he recorded 3 roadkills. He picked up the pace. Last year he had suffered on this very same leg, and now he vowed it would be different. He felt strong once the climb started, 4.5 miles of hills, and before the trail section, Jim began looking for that nice drink of water.

At the next exchange, our last runner, the team’s closer, Kenny was ready and anxious to run after waiting all day. He wore a singlet but not the referee-stripped team shirt after listening to the reports of the heat. Jim appeared a few minutes ahead of schedule—to our joy considering the level of difficulty. Kenny took the wristband.



*Our secret weapon – Jim Haugh, or HeeHaw, as we called him. Not only is he a great runner, but he has a fun sense of humor – as evidenced here when we told him to take off his shirt and stand still. In the background is our trusty driver and spotter, Steve. We told him countless times we couldn't have done it without him. He was our hero.*

In the van, we apologized to Jim for missing him at the mountain trail, and Jim shrugged it off. He said when he hadn't seen us at the trail he knew he was on his own. Well, we said, at least we had dropped off the water. "Water?" Jim said. "What water?"

"We left a bottle of water next to a sign that said Hee Haw right at the turn on the trail."

“I never saw it. Coming around the turn I was focusing on the trail. I didn’t see the water or the sign.”

We apologized profusely, and once again Jim shrugged it off. “I knew if you weren’t at the trail I was going to have to run without water. Plus I have a two-year-old’s bladder so it was just as well.” And run he did, fast and furious, ahead of pace, hilly up, hilly down on a mountain trail in 80 degrees with NO WATER! Alone on a mountain, man and moose. “The best part,” Jim said, “10 roadkills.”

Amazing! It was another example of inspired running that kept the team pumped and focused, especially as we were nearing nighttime. If Jim could run the longest hardest leg without water, we said, then we could do something special too.

Suddenly, we realized another team’s van heading the opposite way on the road. We looked for the telltale arrow signs that marked the course from start to finish at varying intervals, and after a time, we didn’t see any. We drove on further and saw no signs, no runners, no vans. We pointed to a driveway to turn around, and Brett reminded us that we were not allowed to use a private residence for van maneuvers. Nervously, we drove on until we found a spot to turn around, all the while wondering how we had missed a turn—all of which were marked with several directional arrows. We found

our error as we saw runners and arrows pointing up a slanting hill.

We turned, and there on the hill was Kenny going up, up, up. We cheered loudly, rang the bells, and whistled while Kenny worked the hill. Three possible slowdowns had been averted: the traffic jam; Jim with no water; and the van going the wrong way. We felt fortunate, and our streak of luck would continue.

Kenny was thinking, “My first leg...finally after everyone else ran.” He had some butterflies in his stomach. This 4.6 miler, despite the short distance, was rated very hard with—what was becoming a broken record—steep climbs and descents. A leg breaker, said the course guide. He remembered the phrase “leg breaker” from last year. Maverick’s buddy “Little Joe” had run this leg, and their team had kept rubbing it in. That was a year ago. “Time flies,” Kenny thought, “and now I’ve got to do it. Shit!”

And he did it skillfully with a 7:45 pace. Kenny finished at an elementary school right on schedule, remarkable considering the length and scale of the hill, and he handed back to our first runner, Gail. It was after 6 pm, and though not fully dark, rules dictated that between 6 pm and 6 am, every runner had to wear night gear: vest, headlamp, and two flashing lights, one in front, one in back. There were no exceptions, and failure to comply meant immediate disqualification.

In the van Kenny talked about the heat. “If I had known it was going to be so hot, I would have gone shirtless,” he said. Jim had said the same thing at the end of his leg about wishing he had run shirtless. Yet amid the banter, we were all pleased. After our first set of legs, we were almost a half hour ahead of schedule. We had completed 50 miles.

On Gail’s second leg, we noted the many hills. The course went off-road up a horseshoe out-and-back turn, one of several in the race, and this one was on a long gradual hill up to an inn. We careened over a lumpy field to park and sauntered up to a complimentary coffee table. But there was no coffee, and the proprietor, busy making dinner for paying customers, wasn’t replenishing the supply. There would be several places where, due to our late start and arrival to the stops, food or beverages would be gone or in low supply. Never fear, we had our treasure chest of snacks. Gail finished strong going up the dirt road to the inn.

Marni felt much better on her second leg. The sky darkened as she ran, and she enjoyed night’s gradual eclipse of day. She had difficulty seeing some of the direction signs, and at one point she thought she was lost. Not seeing any flashing lights ahead, she stopped and looked behind her to see if there were any runners. None. Then thankfully, she saw some guys on the side of the road, and they confirmed she was going in the right direction.

Relief set in. The leg was supposed to end at 5.5, but according to her Garmin, it had registered longer.



*Marni is in the pink striped shirt. This was her first relay and she says it is the first of many. She's hooked.*

At the transition area, Marni couldn't find Karen, so she started calling out her own name: "Marni." In the jumble of bodies, she almost put the baton on a very tall lady, but then she heard Karen yell, "This way."

Karen took over. "4 easy miles," she thought. Or at least, it should have been. Twilight surrendered to night, and her eyes were still adjusting. The start of

the leg passed into the woods at a state park. No street lights, no headlights from van traffic, just Karen sporting an inadequate headlamp and the trees sweeping by in clumps of shadow, as she navigated a rutted dirt path through the impenetrable darkness. She was worried about twisting an ankle, but got through it without incident. “This was not a fun stretch to run,” she concluded.

Karen begot Kim. “It’s dark, it’s only 3 miles, and it’s flat,” Kim was thinking. “What more could a girl want? How about some limberness in the legs?” Her muscles were heavy and tight and didn’t want to move. First mile 8:30 pace? Was the Garmin working? She had no time other than to push, push, push. No time to think, no time to smile. She began to wonder about the frogs? During rainy season, frogs can mar the road in squishy lumps. The leg, she mused, was uneventful, unfortunately. Yet she scored 3 roadkill.

Kim begot Brett, all up and down rolling terrain, all in the deepening darkness. Through each exchange was our signal man, Steve in his referee shirt and black shorts, pumped up on Red Bull and 5-hour energy drink, ticking like the Energizer Bunny on the equivalent of sports crack.

It was closing in on 8 pm.



*Our trusty driver, in his trademark derby, Steve is the man in the middle, flanked by Brett on the left and Kim on his right.*

Brett's leg was a hard 7.7 with views of ponds, majestic mountains, and a quaint New England village with several church steeples, not that he could see any of them. Down the first hill he passed a troop of Girl Scouts, and he let out a yelp. They screamed back in fun, and he was flying. Brett ran the first mile in 6:20 pace, so he reeled in the reins a bit. He rounded a bend and began climbing hills. The team had started to catch some of the early-starting teams, and around every corner he started passing whole lines of runners struggling with the mountains.

Brett had done a lot of killer hills in training, all along the Wissahickon Creek: Ridge Avenue, The Manayunk Wall, Shawmont, and more. And the training had paid off as he rounded the corner to the finish. “I remembered from last year that it’s really hard to see in the dark when you come in,” Brett said. He had instructed the team to yell out the team number, but in his running haze, he forgot our team number. He pulled out his vest and pointed his light down to illuminate 275 on his bib. “275! 275! 275!” he yelled, and handed off the sweaty baton to Melanie.

Before Melanie’s leg, Kenny found a school entrance with ledges to relax, and when I sat, I realized how tired I was. It was after 9 pm, and we had been active since daybreak. During River to Sea, the 92 mile relay in NJ held in August, this is where we would be heading home, exhausted, looking forward to hot showers and warm beds. At Reach the Beach, some of us still had three legs left.

At the cones in the dark, Melanie was wondering how she would recognize Brett coming into the transition area. Also, how would she be able to follow the course? The first question was answered as Brett came sprinting in, calling out, “275, 275, 275.” Melanie started the longest leg during the night, a hard 8.2 miles. Hills galore, the road meandered 3 miles along the Squam Lake where *On Golden Pond* was filmed. But she couldn’t see it, running in the gathering fog, headlamp lighting a patch of road maybe three feet ahead.

Up in the sky, in the pitch blackness of the countryside, the stars were beaming brilliantly, stretched across the landscape like the lights of lost runners, and Melanie was feeling more relaxed on this leg too. She was having no trouble finding the course. The arrow markers were reflective and glowed in the dark when your light hit them. She hadn't looked at the topography profile in advance, figuring ignorance is bliss. She was enjoying the leg, running in the dark, unaware of the hills until she felt them. She was passed early by a speedy runner who made her wonder if she were standing still, and for the rest of the leg she didn't see another runner until the final mile—and it was the Tutu girl. On a tougher longer leg than the first, Melanie had equaled her earlier pace time, once again ahead of the crack-factor chart.

Waiting at the next exchange, I slipped away through some woods to pee and found myself, with creepy-crawly hairs standing up on the back of my neck, in an unkempt cemetery with a few jagged tombstones and a stick cross, like an aging scarecrow, draped in a swaddling cloth. At that moment, it was easy to believe in ghosts. I was spooked and peed in record time. Meanwhile, Jim, Kenny, and Steve back in the real world got tuna sandwiches at a school and scrounged up an apple for me.

In the dark, you couldn't see your runner approaching. All headlamps looked the same,

though Melanie's flashing lights had a disco mode. Steve, in his early warning spot, saw her and the whistles sounded. All of a sudden Melanie was there, slapping me with the baton, saying, "Turn on your headlamp." I said, "Don't I have it on?" She urged, "No, no. Go, go, go!"

I scampered immediately up a hill with Brett calling out, "Catch the Tutus." He was referring to a team of women wearing pink tutus. Written on their van was Flirts in Skirts. Throughout the relay, there were several teams with our start time jockeying back and forth that we vowed to catch. None were more prominent than the Tutus.

Yet as the hill rose and rose on a hard 6.4 leg, the flashing light of the tutu girl was growing dim. I knew the first half of my leg was all uphill, described as a long steep climb followed by a long steep descent, and while I tried to pace, the Tutu's light grew dimmer and then, to my despair in the dark, disappeared. I was in the middle of New Hampshire, seemingly all alone, and yet in the cavernous blackness with thick fog creating a mist, headlamp barely lighting my steps, I felt otherworldly transformed and invigorated. Climbing up a mountain, in utter silence, the only sound was my footfalls. The stark aloneness was surreal, and it filled me with serenity. Later Melanie confided similar feelings of marvel running in the silent night.

Finally, I crested the hill after 3 miles, and my labored breathing began to settle. My glutes were tight, yet heading down and down, my feet slapping at the ground with great gravitational force, my quads tensing, I found my stride. And with an electric charge of adrenaline, I saw lights appearing ahead, first as pinpoints and then as flashing smears against the blackness. One by one, I caught and passed the lights, only to find more ahead. I chased them all down. I was in stealth mode, tracking runners with locked-in radar, blips on the screen. The pounding tore at my quads, tightening them into cables, and at times I could barely control the speed of descent on the downhills. I kept tracking, fueled by an inner fire, by the words “Catch the Tutus.”

Nothing in the entire world mattered at that moment, zooming down that hill like a heat-seeking missile, other than getting to the exchange line ahead of the Tutus.

Even though this was my second leg with two left, I was no longer pacing. I was racing, my chest rising and falling in rhythm, my internal combustion warming my aching muscles. And there up ahead, a runner appeared almost like a mirage in the fog, and the figment of light and shadow seemed to show a broad beam across its bottom. As I drew closer, I realized it was a tutu. Euphoria, exultation: to the vintage runner, an athlete’s orgasm.

“Catch the Tutus,” the words whispered in the night. “Catch the Tutus.”

Off to the side of the road, her support van was watching us approach. I felt glee, unabashed spasms of joy. Her teammates yelled, “Almost at the finish, Kelly. You can do it.” But we all heard the timber of their voices, the wayward lilt of impending defeat underlining their words. We all understood: Kelly was slowing down, and I was speeding up. I had reached the point in a special run, rare and wonderful, as unique as the crystalline splendor of a new snowflake, when your body is transformed and your mind has cloaked you in a numbness of sinew and stride and you feel unstoppable. And for those fleeting moments you are, and anyone in your sight becomes your quarry. And glory is yours.

Every runner longs for this moment, and here it was for me, in the midst of the racing experience of a lifetime, part of a team counting on you, and you vying to make your team proud. Running is lonely at times, solo, but not in a relay, not when your team is waiting a half mile up the road hoping you “Catch the Tutus.”



*The Tutu's! These girls can run, but I “roadkilled” them. And it felt good!*

I said in a perfect flow under my breath, “Not today, Kelly,” and I flew by her, basking in my own strength and endurance, even as hers deflated from her body. Up ahead in the darkness, I saw the swirling lights of the exchange and the shadowy umbra of people. On the side of the road, like a lighthouse beacon, was Steve pointing out the finish line. If a man could fly, I was doing it, running so fast down the hill that my body was almost getting ahead of my feet.

I didn't see Jim yet for the handoff, and then there was Brett twenty yards ahead of the exchange line yelling for me to watch the sidewalk. I was a person possessed, not breaking stride, and wearing

my glasses misted over by fog, I never saw the rising curb. My left foot hit it on the upswing, and I skidded, now really flying, with Brett's arms reaching out. I slid, and slipping into and out of Brett's arms instantaneously, somehow I found my balance and regained my footing, where only a moment before both of my feet were off the ground and the sidewalk was coming up like a runaway truck. Wobbling, I stumbled to the line and slapped the wristband onto Jim.

Perhaps it was only my own mortality, but I swear I felt the whole team, if not the entire exchange zone, shudder with dread as I hit the curb and then, when I righted my legs, exhale sharply with relief. The team gathered around me, arms grabbing me, voices hailing me, all relieved that I had dodged another potential pitfall—crashing headfirst into the concrete. Brett asked if I heard him yell for the curb and did I feel him grab me.

“I couldn't see with my glasses fogged and I couldn't stop,” I said.

“I don't know how you didn't fall, man. My heart was in my throat.”

“I know. I know.”

“But you did it. You caught the freaking Tutus, man. Great job. You did it.”

“I know,” I smiled the smile of kings. “I caught the freaking Tutus.”

I never wanted the moment to end. I was buoyantly happy, awake to the world. Among the numerous roadkills of my leg, I had caught the famous Tutus. When runners are asked why they do crazy things like 24-hour relays, you point to a moment like this when you start a leg in the dark, fighting off sleep and fatigue, and you finish it as if the whole world is watching and you say, “I caught the freaking Tutus.”



*This is Kim hanging out by the van and our mascot, the mylar #9 balloon. Every team member admitted to laughing at least once while running their leg after seeing the van pass with the 9 disappearing into the distance.*

Jim had said he was going to run a nice relaxed night leg, but he did anything but. It was a hard 7.5 miler with—yep, you guessed it—climbs and descents. The terrain was set: what goes up must come down. “I wanted to survive the leg comfortably,” Jim said. The first two miles went straight uphill. At an intersection directed by a police officer, a vehicle had stopped and the driver began stating that he wasn’t drinking. The cop told him it wasn’t a sobriety check, and the driver continued on. Later Brett joked that the driver had replied to cop, “Ok, good, then it doesn’t matter that I really was drinking.”

Midway in the run, Jim was all alone. The fog had disappeared, and it was quiet except for his breathing. He turned off his headlamp and looked straight up at the sky full of the most stars he had ever seen. “Gorgeous,” he said to himself.

He racked up 12 more roadkill, and at the end, with the headlamps at the exchange zone shining in his eyes, he was momentarily blinded and smashed into Kenny, but without injury, before passing the baton.

“Night run!” Kenny thought. “This is what RTB is all about! So much fun!” He made a mental note to do this back home: get a group together to run along a country road in the middle of nowhere late at night.

On and on we went through the night, running, pacing, racing. Tents began popping up under tree-

lined expanses, and we ran on. Sleeping bags appeared in fields, and we ran on. Bodies were cast across couches in school hallways leading to bathrooms. We relieved ourselves and ran on. Our heads lulled on the van seats. We stole sleep ten minutes here, ten minutes there, and we ran on. A couple teammates would take turns sprawling on the back benches, while the team ran on. It seemed as though everyone else along the way was sleeping. It seemed as though the world was sleeping, and it was, while we ran on.

Jim and I went into a school during Kenny's run, and while he washed up in a bathroom, I went to the cafeteria where Girl Scouts were scooping out spaghetti. Some teammates joined me, and craving protein, I ate the meatballs off the top and gave the pasta to Melanie. All of us ate with relish, as if it were a gourmet meal, and in the middle of the night, after snacking on power bars and pretzels and Cheez Its, it was. We ordered some extra plates, one of which Kenny ate when he finished his leg.

"At any other time," he said, digging into the spaghetti, "this would just taste like any old food, but right now it's the best thing I've ever eaten." Hungry and tired, we all agreed. After coming back to the van, Jim was polishing off his own plate of spaghetti. "This is great," he said. "And I got the last plate. People behind me were groaning." Fortune was still firmly on our side.

Another plate of spaghetti kept getting shuffled around the van, first under benches, and then finally resting on Melanie's bag, where getting up she stepped on it. Kim and Marni had been waiting for nausea to pass to eat the spaghetti, but after it had grown soggy, it was tossed. At one point when Melanie got back into the van, she asked for the spaghetti. I told her it had just been thrown out. She was disappointed, and I reminded her that she had stepped on it. She shrugged and said, "I don't care. I'm hungry."

For hours we had searched the van for Gu, only to discover it too late in the beer cooler.

Lack of sleep began to take its toll, and time became a blur. Over and over the same Lewis Taylor CD droned. Kenny slumped his head forward on the back of his seat and joked, "I want to go home. Let's go home." Brett, riding shotgun, stated he just wanted to snooze for ten minutes. But with runners getting in and out of the van, changing, getting ready to run, the lights and movement kept us awake. Gail, Marni, and Kim all had stomach issues and took doses of Imodium. Remarkably Steve stayed awake, driving every leg, jumping out of the van and watching for our incoming runner. When asked, he said he closed his eyes for a few minutes at one stop. Karen had brought a concoction called badger balm, one more scent for our ripening van, and the women used Baby Wipes to clean off after their legs. Through it all, we ran on.

It was 2:30 am on her third leg when Marni thought, “Unbelievable!” She was in the middle of nowhere beneath a cloudless sky and every star above was a sparkling jewel. “Fantastic!” she thought. There were very few people around her. Yet she could see a stray flashing light, and she settled in and enjoyed the peacefulness of the run. She said, “It’s something I will never forget.”

Before her third leg, Karen had been dozing on and off in the van for a couple of hours, but now she was surprisingly alert and ready to run again. “This will be my longest run,” she thought. She reviewed the topography map and slid a 5-Hour Energy into her pocket. It was the dead of night, and while exhaustion caught up with her competitors, Karen was going strong, starting to tally up roadkill. As usual, Steve was at his post a short distance from the transition area. “It was reassuring to see him,” Karen said, “because it meant that Kim was just ahead and ready to roll.”



*Karen, flanked by the gummy snake and our van decorations, getting ready for her night run. The only time we got any sleep was when Karen was running. She constantly kept us laughing.*

Kim was more than ready to roll. “I’m freezing,” she thought. “45 degrees is cold for a reptile like me. Oh wait, that’s Jimmy.”

At the end of Karen’s leg, Steve popped his head inside the van door and announced, “Come on. It’s the Red Bull stop.” I was leaden tired, my eyes slits, my body slumped in a ball against Melanie’s warmth, but I roused. If Steve could stay awake driving, then I owed it to him. I hobbled to the Red Bull truck, got my can, handed it to Steve, who took his place as our moving watchtower, and I went back to the van.

Before her leg, Kim was vacillating. Red Bull? She wanted one, but knew her belly wouldn't like it. Fleece? No fleece? Hat? No hat?

“Mel was being great,” Kim remembered, “because I was bitching about the cold for 15 solid minutes.” Kim was antsy. She hadn't had any sleep yet. At the exchange she began sighting for Karen and saw her gait and long hair. Not five minutes into the leg, Kim experienced the horrible, the dreaded encounter. First time ever, she had been roadkilled.

“Damn, that kid's moving, guess it's ok,” she thought. The scenery looked familiar, and she recalled doing the same leg last year, except now she was flying. “Where were the freaking frogs?” she wondered, praying for some biblical scene for moral support. “Maybe they can take my first born if I can run this sub 7:30s.” Cool, she mused, she was staying on pace. Push, push, push. Catching the Stampede was motivation. She came across a little bridge to a lighted fountain pond to the finish. Over the 5.4 mile stretch, she had achieved her goal of a 7:30 pace. She tallied an amazing 16 roadkills, but needed an immediate stop at a Port-a-Potty.

“Damn, I got runs that Montezuma would be jealous of. Yet the Port-a-Potty lines were eternally long. Crap, literally, I'm hurting.” Her belly was cramping, and she couldn't sleep it off. Screw it, she made a beeline into the woods, thinking it wasn't lovely or ladylike, but at least it would hone her camping skills.

There was a battle of wits between Brett and Kenny when Brett stacked up his roadkill to Kenny's. This occurred after we had entered a parking lot with—no lie—the name Kenneth A. Brett School. With Brett temporarily in the roadkill lead, Kenny said, with his grandiloquent wit, “Passing an Old Folks Home and running through a cemetery don't count as roadkill, Brett.” The van burst out with laughter. Kenny had gotten the best of this one. After all, it wasn't the Brett A. Kenneth School.

Even when Brett didn't get the last word, he regaled us with the loudest belches. A deep from the belly guttural call of a wounded animal lost in the wild. Like a foghorn in the deep dark sea. He proudly informed us that he gathered air into his esophagus before he let out a barn-storming burp. Brett told us that his wife Mary Rose, with wise marital tolerance, would simply ask him not to belch around company. Ah, how nice, he was treating us like family, belching freely and ferociously.

The bladder boys, Jim and I, peed behind a wall at a strip mall, no easy feat, since urinating or indecent public exposure was grounds for disqualification. I also changed into my next running outfit, while Melanie went to the exchange for her third leg. For a moment, there were two moons shining that night, the one in the sky—and mine. The darkness apparently can hide a lot, even my bare naked butt, as white as any ghost.

It was about 4 am when Kim came into the transition point, yelling enthusiastically, “Go, Brett! Go!” He was excited about this run because it was a 10K down the mountain. Once again he clocked a very fast first mile when he saw a string of runners in front of him. As he passed each runner, he offered words of encouragement even as he smiled at the tally of road kills. He sped up. At mile 3, he encountered a steep downhill that felt so good he let out a cheer, “Woo hoo!”

Then he was alone, no one in front of him. The night air was so still. “All I can see in this fog is my breath and the occasional car out for an early morning fishing excursion,” he said. He looked up at the stars, marveling at the clarity of the night. Just as he was getting used to running alone, he saw the twirling lights of the nighttime transition.

For her third leg, Melanie had been hoping to run without night gear, but the darkness was stubborn, and it was not yet 6 am. At 5:30 am, she was waiting in the chill in shorts and a singlet, not having packed anything warmer to wear. Just as Brett, as always, blasted toward the line, we teammates arrived. He was calling out, “275, 275, 275.” We had to put the bells and whistles away overnight through many townships designated as Quiet Zones. Kim was there, and they discussed closing in on the Ambler Stampede. The team was getting excited, knowing it was just a matter of time.



*Four of our Whole 9 Yards. (From left to right: Karen, Gail, Kim and Melanie)*

On this leg, Melanie unfurled her best effort. Her first had been 7.2, her second 8.2, and this one 6.9: all hilly challenges, two in the night. She had been shivering at the exchange, so she started out running faster than she had planned. As she warmed up, she was enjoying the quiet and solitude of the morning, and once in the faster pace, she kept it going. And there in her midst was roadkill. She thought, you'd like to think it's not about getting roadkill but once you get a taste of blood, you grow hungry for more. At sundown, runners become vampires. After this leg, she knew she had one leg left and it was half the distance of these first three legs. Not for a second did she waver. She made the decision to

gun it and get as many roadkills as possible. She reveled in the motivation as she passed runners.

Someone yelled, “Four miles.”

She yelled back, “To go? Or already done?”

“Already done.”

She looked at her watch and quickly did the math, realizing she was running sub-8 miles, but she knew the last couple miles were a hilly nightmare. She kept running and gunning on long and winding slopes.

In Bear Brook State Park, Captain Nathan Relles and some of his Ambler Stampede runners were at the exchange line. Their runner took off as I waddled to the exchange. People were sleeping behind their vans and throughout the campgrounds. There was an outdoor pavilion with a fire crackling. We enjoyed none of that, as not 6 minutes later Melanie came around the bend, speeding into sight. Our team was ecstatic. Kenny and I had calculated that, considering how many hills we had driven to get here, that Melanie would still be out on the road. And now here she was coming, with her strong elegant stride, steady and swift.

She was about to finish her favorite and best leg, and then she came down a trail off the road and heard Brett call, “Nice job, you closed the gap by 11 minutes on the other team.” She loved hearing the

reward to her effort, and a sweet content smile bloomed on her face. Her friend Andrew with the Stampede saw Melanie finish her finest performance of the relay, and so did I as she raced toward me.

Overall, with her 11 minutes, our team had made up almost three hours of time catching the Stampede. Already having run two legs, on this her third leg, up hill after hill, she had brought our team into the daylight, and both she and the sun were shining brightly.

“Go, go, go,” Melanie coaxed as she slapped me with the wristband. I smiled with pride at her great run, and took off down an embankment and across a bridge until I veered back to the road. Jack, the Stampede runner, was too good for me to make up any minutes, but my goal was to go out steady and strong, just as all my teammates had done before me. This was my toughest leg, a hard 8.9 miles, once again the first half uphill. The second half was flat terrain, or so the description read.

There was roadkill ahead, and I planned to pace and pick them off, betting that my hill training had been stronger than theirs. I had River to Sea under my belt, as well as some double and triple days of running, morning and night, with Melanie and the Ambler crew. The van, in a quiet zone, eased on by, and I saw Steve in the driver’s seat pointing ahead to a guy with the number 34 on his back, the team named the Cutters after the movie *Breaking*

*Away.* I nodded and tracked him down as the sun slowly rose and the fog burned off. It was after 6 am, and I didn't have the weight of the night gear.

Up and up the road went, and I was breathing hard. My legs were cooked from the first two legs, especially my quads, and yet I forced a little spring into my step, thriving on the anticipation of my teammates waiting ahead. I was wearing my water belt and sipped every mile. It was heavy; I wished I had just carried a small water bottle. When I heard another van call, "A half mile to the top of the hill," I picked up my pace, looking forward to the flats ahead. Problem was the flats never came, yet I was locked into stride, and I picked up the pace. When someone said, "Four miles left," I shifted to another gear, and somehow my legs responded. I reeled in roadkill.

The terrain switched to some steep downhills that tore at my quads, and then gradually the road started wind-milling back upward onto a rocky dirt trail with a treacherous pitch. Someone said, "One mile left."

I looked at my watch and knew he had to be wrong. I figured there were about 2 miles left. Yet not sure, I picked up pace again, knowing whether it was a one or two miles I could finish strong. Time clicked away. I kept checking my watch, and where I thought the finish line should be, it was nowhere in sight. As the trail changed back to the road and up yet again, a race marshal said, "500 yards left." I

was working hard, and my body and mind quaked at another quarter-plus mile.

Meanwhile, along with Kenny, Melanie was sent out to spot for me under the guise that she would easily be able to recognize me on the road. She saw a guy who looked like me, so she sent Kenny up to the line to alert Jim. Jim got psyched and ready to run, only to discover that it wasn't me. So Jim sent Steve back to his rightful place, saying, "You go spot. Those two are terrible."

I saw Steve waving and then eventually Jim at the line. I finished, exhausted, disappointed with my time. I swore the leg was long, and my teammates, with generous hearts, said they had heard other runners complaining about other legs being long. (Days later, the message board of the website judged the leg to be about 9.2 miles.)



*Melanie and I with three legs down and one to go. First, R2C (River to Sea), now RTB (Reach the Beach) we're definitely hooked on relays!*

After drinking some Red Bull, having gotten only two restless naps of 20 minutes, Jim ran a great sub-7 pace on a 4.5 miler, his fastest pace of the race, and as the van passed, we threw a rubber snake at him. Back in Philly during training as Jim ran down Wisers Mill Road, a snake slithered into his path. Flustered, he jumped in fright, but instead of avoiding the snake, he came plopping down right on top of it, splattering it on the road. When greeted with the toy snake, Jim laughed.

Then as we drove on, lo and behold, the golden moment had arrived. Finally there was Wade on the shoulder of the road, running for the Stampede. We cheered with gusto after some twenty hours of running and having falsely sighted a hundred Wades along the way. "There's Wade," we all hollered. "Look, it's really Wade." We took a photo of him. For fun we threw a snake, just out of sheer delirium. It glanced off his muscled body, and he nodded and kept running. "Yep, that's definitely Wade."

Jim knew he wanted to push the leg hard, it being his shortest. The only problem was his hamstring was bothering him. He tried loosening it up the first mile and then he took off. "It gets kind of primal passing people," Jim said. "You pass one runner and you want to pass another. It's addicting." He bagged a staggering amount of roadkill, 19 on this leg.

At the next exchange, some of us had a breakfast of blueberry pancakes, eggs, bacon, and sausage provided by the Candia Volunteer Fire Department. It was delicious. Kenny followed up with a very hard 8.6 miler, winding past farms and fields. “Where was everyone?” he wondered. There was hardly anyone on the road, and the van had not come by. “Am I lost?” he thought. And then finally the van appeared. He began wondering how far ahead the Ambler Stampede runner was. What would he do if he caught her?

The van passed the Stampede runner, and as we headed to the next exchange, we figured that Kenny was pacing to catch the other team halfway through the leg. “I don’t know if Kenny’s going to pass,” Brett said. Say what? Why? “Because Kenny’s a nice guy, he’s humble, and he may decide to run her pace and talk rather than pass.”

Brett had read Kenny’s mind because on the road Kenny was thinking, “Will she be mad at me if I pass her? Should I just keep up with her, or will that be insulting?” Then he saw her ahead, Lisa. He pulled up to 10 yards behind her. Without looking back, Lisa said, “Is that you, Kenny Baby?”

How did she know? They ran together for awhile, talking, shooting the breeze. Then he made the decision to pass, hoping she wouldn’t be angry at him. He didn’t have a lot of time to think about it as a short steep hill appeared. It was so steep that he took a page from ultra-marathons and stopped to

walk. “I decided to save the energy,” he said, “because I wasn’t running any faster than I could walk.” And there at the top of the hill was Nathan with a Twizzler. “If I knew he’d be there,” Kenny said, “I would have run up the hill, just to look good!”



*KennyBaby – will run for Swedish Fish, or cute brunettes with pony tails! Kenny was our closer, the final guy in our rotation and what a runner he is, and a heck of a nice guy, too.*

The next transition was at the Chester College of New England, where they had set up a complimentary food spread in a student dorm. We used real flushing toilets, though the gals had a long line to navigate. At the exchange line, we set up the signaling system where we discovered that, with the sun up, the quiet zones had been lifted. And we witnessed the arrival of Kenny on the horizon with his smooth stride. He was ahead of the Ambler Stampede. We rang the bells and sounded our whistles, splitting the still morning air. The rooster had crowed, and the Whole Nine Yards was a sleeping giant awakened.

“So what happened?” we asked. Kenny said he had talked to their runner for a bit, asked how she was doing, wished her well, and kept running. We had finished our 3rd set of legs with one set left, and we had passed the Stampede. It was something many of us were not sure we could do since they had a 3-hour lead. Yet as we drew nearer throughout the day and night, we all began to believe. We were united in our goal and united in our success. We had passed the Stampede—what an achievement.

We asked Brett as a team what he had predicted for our last legs, and we all sighed collectively as he called off the times. “Gail, we need X:XX from you. Marni, you need to do X:XX. Karen, you should do X:XX.” And so on down the line. We each listened without complaint, not sure whether we could do it, the whole while knowing somehow we would. Kenny kept joking, “I want to go home.

I want to go home.” To relieve some of the pressure, Brett said we could walk the hills, yet even as he spoke, we all knew we were not going to walk the hills. We had come too far to give anything less than our best effort for our last leg.

Daylight had flashed on full force, yet despite the heat, for the final legs many teammates wore their zebra-striped referee shirts, even though it was an extra non-breathing cover. Gail begot Marni in the rising heat, and then Karen begot Kim in hotter temperatures.

Gail, who had flown in from Colorado to be part of the team, finished right on target, with one of her best runs of the race. She was a courageously tough runner, having spent a bad night in the van with a sick stomach. That she didn't miss a beat was a testament to her strength. The same can be said for Marni. In her first RTB, also battling an overnight bout of nausea, she finished under an 8-minute pace, saving her best for last.

“Even though I had been nauseous for hours, had almost no sleep, and was exhausted,” Marni said, “I ended up running my best leg.” She passed more than a few runners, and her total tally for roadkill climbed to 20. Coming into the transition area with the entire team yelling and screaming, she was on cloud nine. “I was truly ecstatic,” she said.

Karen's 4th leg, although rated easy, was hilly, a trend throughout the relay. It had gotten hotter, and

Karen was feeling queasy from lack of food and sleep. The stretch along the roadside was fairly boring, yet she knew the Stampede was not too far behind. The team had worked hard to pass them, and she didn't want them to gain any ground on her watch. So she kept looking over her shoulder and running strong.

Karen came around her final bend, and fittingly there was Steve supporting her with fluids and encouragement. The sight of them both together made us hoot and holler all that much louder. Karen had run every single leg under her predicted time, all confidently, and all with a friendly smile. What was in that badger balm, anyway? We cheered each and everybody. Every finished leg was cause for celebration. We were closing in on the beach.

Though her longest leg, 7.4 miles, Kim was running with enthusiasm, as vibrantly as her first leg. "Long and hard, that's how I like it baby!" she thought. "Feel like I should be done. Dammit, Gail's done, bitch, but she did run up Mt. Bretton. Damn, she kicked ass."

It was hot and sunny, and Kim was only wearing a sports bra and the zebra pinnie shirt. "Does my ass look fat in this? Screw it, I'm stocky and short. S.S., my nickname should be the SS Kim." Her thoughts were meandering. In the hottest part of the day, after 22 miles of running, her mind was getting

a little off track. The Stampede's van passed and took photographs.

“Crap!” She noticed a traffic light ahead with a cop on foot. “I’m not slowing down for him or anybody.” As the van approached the intersection, just as Kim requested, we blasted music. The cop saw Kim and stopped traffic in all four directions. She raised her hands and blew a whistle she was carrying. The traffic cop at the light waved her on with a laugh. “Come on, pick it up,” he joked. And with true grit, she did.

She kept seeing the same damn vans. Other teams were calling her “Ref.” Dumb asses! “Give us a touchdown,” they would yell. “Yeah, yeah,” she countered, “Give me a ride.” Through all the fun, she focused on running. This was a killer leg, and every muscle waist down was screaming. She scaled a huge long hill. It was hot, she was thirsty, she was hurting, and she kept going, pacing and racing.

Then there ahead was a vision, if it wasn't a mirage. Like a fountain of youth! Blessed Ponce-de-Leon, a sprinkler was propelling waves of water up high and raining down. She let out a grunt of joy and waved to the fountain's owners. Fighting through the rest of the leg, through stiffening legs, through heat oppression, it was exactly what she needed.

Along the side of the road, we saw some interesting sights. At a yard sale, there were three guys sitting

on a couch under a tree drinking a case of beer, watching the race. The world was their widescreen TV.

Waiting at the exchange for his last leg, Brett felt a little envy that half the team was done, but mostly he was excited, down to his last 4 miles of the relay. He thought, “What’s four miles after all of this? Nothing. A drop in the hat.”

Brett and Kim had devised to hand off the baton in track-and-field style with Brett running and putting his hand back. And that was exactly what they did. Kim gracefully slapped the baton into his hand, blindly, efficiently, perfectly, and hallelujah, she was done. Roadkills? She couldn’t remember, she didn’t care. She was done, done, done. She had run a remarkable 7:45 pace, wearing the striped team shirt, all after being sick overnight.

Brett burst out of his cannon. He rounded the corner and headed into the busy town square of Exeter where he was surprised there was no police assistance. At this point, he couldn’t have cared less if he got honked so he ran through the center of the intersection and started up a long hill. “A hill?” he thought. “Where in the hell did this come from?” This leg was rated easy. He looked down at his Garmin GPS watch and could see only 2 miles registered.

“This is where it happened,” he said. “I lost everything. I was done. Defeated. I let my team

down. I can't finish." He was going through the highs and lows of distance running. He had hit the wall, and all he could do was try and survive. Mile 3 passed, and his eyes started to well up with tears. "I just can't believe I can't make it," he thought. He peered over his right shoulder, discovering two runners trying to pass. It was the challenge he needed, and he gathered up enough energy to hold them off.

In the van, we hit the traffic in the town square, and by the time we passed Brett on the road he was two miles into his 4 mile run. We raced to the next exchange at Timberland Corporate Office, and Melanie jumped out of the van. She hadn't expected the day to be this hot, and she debated: carry water or not carry water? She decided to carry the water, stuffing a bottle in the top of her running bra.

Half a mile to go, Brett scaled the hill and started on a flat course towards Timberland Corporate Office when the doubts returned. Once again he went through the highs and lows. "I lost everything. I was done. Defeated..." Then he saw Kim and Gail sitting on the curb, and they jumped up blowing the team whistles. He had nothing left, but he put a hand into his back pocket and pulled out his whistle and started blowing. In severe pain, he rounded the last corner and gutted it out to the line, just as if he were in the last part of a marathon—which he was, except this one was over 24 hours without sleep. He handed off to Melanie.

“I’m finished in more ways than one,” Brett said. On the walk to the van, he got light-headed and plopped down into the passenger seat where he had been for hundreds and hundreds of miles. He longed to stay there and rest, but there was no time. Just as Steve put the van into drive, Brett leaned out the window thinking he would throw up. But he didn’t. He explained, “I didn’t have the energy to throw up. Man, what a ride.”

“My legs were so dead,” Brett said, “that I wasn’t sure I was going to make it. I thought I was going to have to walk.” But he didn’t. Just as he started the race charging to the line, he left every ounce of blood and sweat out on the road. He had a run a sub-8 pace. Over and over, before, during, and after the race, Brett had proven himself not just to be a captain but a leader. It is not something designated; it is earned. He knew when the moment called for serious consideration, and transversely he knew when a light-hearted quip would relieve the broiling chaos all around us and yet, because of his steady guidance, it was chaos that fueled us rather than weakened us. He took the team seriously, but never himself. His humor lightened the mood, while his running lightened the load. While other teams were sleeping, he led us on and on from the darkness back into the light.



*Oh Captain, My Captain. Brett, or Maverick as we called him. He was more than a great leader, he was an inspiring runner. If a team is only as good as their leader, we were definitely great with Brett in charge.*

We were all beginning to understand that the legs listed as mainly flat had plenty of hills. In the heat, Melanie didn't know what to expect. Her leg was listed as mainly flat just like Karen's, like Brett's. Getting in and out of the van had become a chore, everyone groaning under the effort. Going up hills now meant excruciating mental and physical anguish. "I want to go home," Kenny muttered.

Before Melanie had started her last leg, she wasn't sure what she had left. Yet when we passed her in the van, she looked strong and steady once again.

And we confirmed her leg was far from flat. There were hills around every bend. She had to go up an overpass and then wait in the hot sun queuing up at busy Route 1. The water bottle became troublesome, slipping down the front of her bra, and being her modest self, she would wait for traffic to pass before retrieving it. Yet despite everything, she finished more than respectably, once again ahead of pace with another 8 minute pace. Somewhere between last year's Philly marathon training and this year's 500-mile Anchor House bike ride, in this last month of training doing doubles, triples, and even a quadruple, Melanie had become an 8 minute miler.

Again the exchange was around a corner, so I watched as Steve waved his arms and whistled and then Kenny relayed, "Here she comes." She came around the bend, and I smiled at her determination. I smiled with pride; I smiled with love. Melanie was a competitor. The woman that the team fondly dubbed All Business had her game face on, serious and determined. Well, All Business had taken care of business, tired yet triumphant, finishing 4 legs adding up to 26.4 miles.

"Go, go, go," she hailed as she slapped me for the last time with the wristband. What a reward it was for me to see her strong runs, to see her grit and heart, to see her tenacious striding gait coming to all four exchange lines. I felt pride and respect.

Before starting, I had tried to stretch. My quads had been steel cables. Walking had been difficult. Yet somehow just as all my teammates before me and after me had done, I dug deep down into the last reserves of energy and effort. Having Melanie handoff to me helped motivate me. My legs went at a faster pace than I thought I could manage. The team later told me that when they passed in the van I had been much further than they thought. Just keep it going as long as you can, I thought. Knowing that Brett and Melanie's legs were not flat, I expected the worst and got it over 4.9 miles of hills. I attacked every one, quads aching, joints throbbing, knees protesting. Up I went rounding bends, switch-backing the hills.

I was suffering, but gloriously...because as I ran past one roadkill and the next, I knew I was going to maintain the sub-8 pace. After wearing my watch for two days, my wrist started to chafe. Finally I reached the top of the hills, and I heard someone call out, "Last mile." And thankfully it was flat, with a little descent. Up ahead, like a friendly harbor, a lighthouse of hope, was Steve in striped shirt and black pants, waving and whistling. And there beyond him was the exchange line, beautifully inviting in its simplicity and security, its promise of finish. I tagged Jim with the baton, staggered over to a tree, and when the team swarmed around me, I was deliriously happy and, more importantly, done.

Jim was on the road with a red-painted 9 and his name Hee Haw on his bare back. For several miles,

Jim ran up hills during his mostly flat last leg in the 80+ heat. He was sweating so much the marker had smeared in lines rolling down his skin, as if he had been wounded, and once again his hamstring was tight. “Are we there yet?” he asked himself. His hamstring wasn’t getting worse, so he picked up the pace. He caught and passed roadkill going up the first hill. He remembered thinking, “A hill on the beach line? This was not Sea Isle.” And then up over the horizon, coming around a turn, Jim saw the ocean, smelled its sweet briny scent, felt its crisp caress of salt air, and he felt uplifted and inspired. It had taken over 200 miles to get here, and for his last 2 miles he followed the shoreline past beach houses and mansions. He was hoping to get 9 more roadkill to equal 50 total.



*Almost there. This was the first time we saw the water.*

“A sight I loved to see the entire trip was the line of vans before the transition area,” Jim said. “You knew you were close to the finish.” As for roadkill, he caught the 9 he needed plus an additional 11, giving him a stunning 61 total, the leader of the team. Kenny would finish second with 41.

The team jockeyed to the final exchange with our closer prepping for the bottom of the ninth, literally. Brett painted a red 9 along with Kenny Baby on Kenny’s back. Steve was standing on a piling by the ocean, watching the roads curve along the sea. He waved and whistled, and the rest of the team joined him. Jim came around a blind turn and handed off the final time to Kenny.

Far from home but close to goal, Kenny sprinted out for the last leg, the only truly flat leg in the relay, and he ran through town along the coast in a 7 minute flat pace. What a bright, beautiful day, Kenny thought. There was a headwind, but not too bad. He wanted to finish strong, and he wondered where he would catch the team for the final run-in together.

We drove to the finish line, and Kim carried Kenny’s striped team shirt. Kim and Brett held out the shirt as we watched Kenny turn off the road and onto the sand. We began jumping up and screaming, clanging our cowbells, sounding our whistles. Kenny put his arms out and like Superman seamlessly slid into the shirt without breaking stride.



*The final 100 yards to the finish. It was euphoric.*

The last hundred yards were a gauntlet within two fences, a tube surrounded by spectators, and we ran the gauntlet with boundless energy and unfathomable joy. Kenny ran to the left chute for runners, while we ran the right chute parallel to him. We were roaring, ringing bells, whistling with ear-piercing volume. It was the sound of our thunder; it was the heart of our team. The thunder had reached the beach. At 4:05 pm Saturday, The Whole Nine Yards had crossed the finish line.

Overall place: 71 out of 296 teams.

14th out of 130 in Mixed Open Division

Overall Team Pace: 8:07

Elapsed Time: 28 hours, 24 minutes, 39 seconds  
over 210 miles.



*210 miles, 28 hours, 24 minutes and 39 seconds later ... we were done. We kick butt ... oh yeah.*

We mobbed Kenny and then everyone else with hugs and high-fives. We took several photos under the finish banner, sampled some Sweet Scoops frozen yogurt, and then we ran one last leg down to the ocean, stripping off clothing and diving into the cold numbing balm of the sea, waves foaming and crashing around us as we played like children on the great gray swirling shore.



*We took “reach the beach” literally.*

We watched the Ambler Stampede finish with—who else?—but Wade carrying the antlers that had been attached to the front hood of their van. Nathan gathered his blissful team for photos, and then we all drove back to the hotel where Melanie managed the distribution of rooms. I wound up showering in one room and then, due to the hotel’s snafu, had to pack up all our gear to another room, a room about the same size as the van.

With Steve taking a break, Jim drove the Silver Bullet to Portsmouth where both teams drank beer and ate pizza at two massive wooden tables, as if we were Vikings in a huge mess hall. After dinner, Kim, a physician’s assistant, came to the aid of an Ambler runner who had a dizzy spell likely due to

excitement and dehydration. She was fine later that night and the next day, to everyone's relief. Yet because Kim went back in the other van to provide medical support, with supreme irony Wade drove back in our van to the hotel. To get to the van on a roof parking lot, we had to climb 5 flights of stairs, which Gail managed with amazing grace in high heels. It was one final hill.

While Melanie joined Karen, Steve, and Brett for snifters of scotch, I melted into bed, asleep as soon as I hit the pillow. We awoke to a beautiful sunny sky and ate some egg sandwiches. In front of the store, Brett said to Melanie, "Don't move. Don't even move an inch." It was such an earnest plea we all froze, and Brett, ever the leader, knocked a giant furry black bee from Melanie's shoulder. It was one more sigh of relief before we repacked the van one final time. At 9:30 Sunday morning, we took photos and then with everyone touching it, we released the huge number 9 balloon and watched it soar to the heavens, all the while hoping it didn't find its way into an unsuspecting gull's belly.



*The next day – before we released the 9 balloon.  
Standing still was the only way we could smile.  
Hamstrings, quads, glutes ... you name it, it hurt.*

Content conversation and hearty laughs led the way home. We stopped in Westboro to drop off Gail, and admittedly we all got a little nostalgic listening to Jim's iPod playing Kermit the Frog singing the Rainbow Connection. Goofballs that we were, we all piled into Gail's rented tiny red Aveo, which fit all 10 of us, 9 comfortably. In a way it symbolized our team: crunched in a tight space, forever bonded, forever close, fast friends, having shared the will to achieve the seemingly impossible. All is possible with great runners and great people.

We lunched at Panera Bread, stopped for gas, and Kenny acted as the service attendant cleaning the

windows until Steve zapped him with windshield washer. Our last stop was a truly foul bathroom in New Jersey. We had come full circle. When Jim exited, he said, “Hold your breath.”

With so much of the race about breathing, it becomes clear that it’s more than breathing that makes the difference. It’s living. It’s life itself. It’s competing against your own limits and goals and succeeding. It’s connecting with people and bonding with new friends. And soon enough we were breathing easily as we crossed over the bridge into the great state of Pennsylvania.

We arrived back in Fort Washington where we had started four days ago. We split the booty of supplies, vowed to have a dinner recap party, hugged and kissed, and thanked our lucky stars to have run such a great race, to have experienced such a grand adventure with great runners and better people.

After driving back and forth hundreds of miles, after running 210 miles, Melanie turned to Kenny and said, “You’re home.”

Not a yard too soon, we were all home.



*The end.*